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Former Chilean Ambassador Killed by Bomb in Washington

Orlando Letelier, former Chilean ambassador to the United States and national leader in the government of former Chilean President Salvador Allende, was killed by a bomb blast at 9:30 a.m. on 21 September in downtown Washington, D.C., while he and two associates employed by the Institute for Policy Studies were driving to work in Letelier's automobile. Letelier, who had previously worked with the Transnational Institute in The Hague, later became the head of the foreign affairs program at the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington. Also killed in the blast was his assistant, Ronni Moffitt. Ronni's husband, Michael Moffitt, was slightly injured but was released immediately after treatment for minor wounds and shock at a nearby hospital. Arrangements were made to bury Letelier in Caracas, Venezuela.

Letelier had loaned his automobile to the Moffitts on the evening of the 20th after their automobile refused to start. Then on the morning of the 21st, the Moffitts passed by Letelier's home at approximately 9:00 a.m. in order to return the car and accompany Letelier to work.

Investigating officials said that the plastic bomb was expertly designed to concentrate its force upward into the driver's seat, and was therefore intended to kill a victim, not merely to destroy the vehicle. They also commented that the bomb had probably been attached by wires or magnets to the underside of the car, although one of Letelier's associates said that a set of car keys had disappeared a few days earlier and might have been used to open the car in order to hide the bomb inside. Officials originally suspected that the bomb had been detonated by radio control but subsequently found pieces of a small clock which they now believe to have been part of a timing device. As yet officials are uncertain as to when the bomb was hidden, speculating that it could have been attached during the evening of the 20th when the car was at the Moffitts' home, or during the few minutes on the morning of the 21st when the Moffitts entered Letelier's home to pick him up on the way to work. As of 28 September, federal and local officials are continuing their investigations.

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In a quick reaction to spreading rumors that the Chilean government had carried out the assassination, an official communique issued by the Chilean Foreign Ministry pointed out that for the past three years there have been attempts on influential Chilean exiles shortly before each opening of the United Nations General Assembly. The communique stated that the bombings were planned and executed by "savagely fanatics motivated by hatred," whose goal was to embarrass and discredit the current Chilean government. The communique noted that as in previous similar incidents, the current Chilean government could expect to suffer widespread criticism which would seriously damage its international credibility; therefore, the Chilean government would only lose by the assassination of its opponents and would gain nothing.

A number of the approximately 3,000 marchers in a memorial procession held on 26 September carried placards accusing the Chilean government of the assassination. Procession participants pledged that the fight against the present Chilean government would continue despite the threat of assassination, and that they would oppose the Pinochet regime wherever and whenever possible. (UNCLASSIFIED)

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